NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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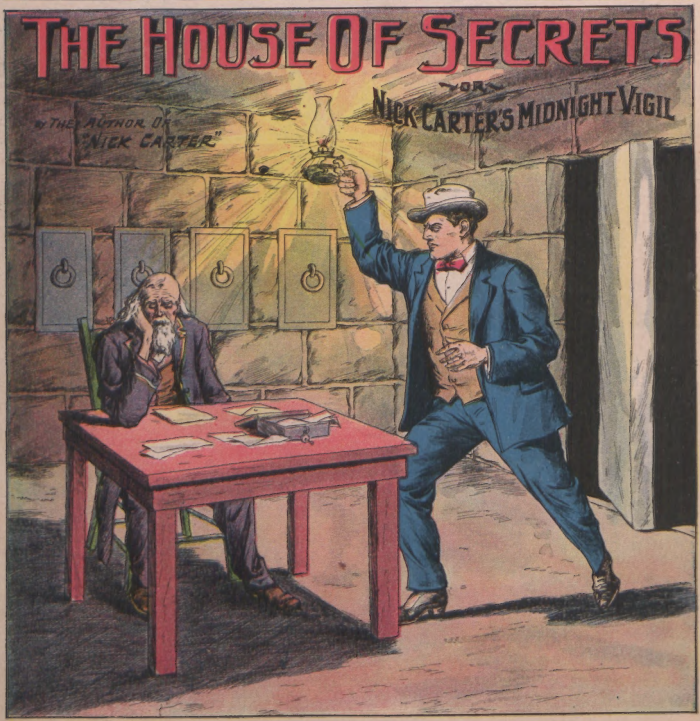
THE HOUSE OF SECRETS

OR

NICK CARTER'S MIDNIGHT VIGIL

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



As Nick entered the subterranean vault he started in amazement. The figure of an old man was seated at a table. "Pedro Pasquale!" exclaimed Nick.

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The House of Secrets;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S MIDNIGHT VIGIL.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE HAUNTED MANSION.

The morning mail brought a short letter to Nick Carter. It was postmarked at Loyola Park, Long Island, and it read:

"My Dear Mr. Carter: Do you think that you could make it convenient to see me on Sunday next? I realize that perhaps I should go to you, instead of asking you to come to me, but—I wish you would come to me if you can and will. The truth is that I am surrounded by some indefinable danger which I cannot name. I do not know what it is; I only know that it exists. It has been so almost ever since the death of my brother Clarence. I think, to be exact, it began about two weeks after that—or, in other words, rather less than two weeks ago, for it is not quite a month since Clarence was killed. I think I can talk with you much better here than there at your office; and, moreover, to tell you the truth, I have become so terrorized that I am afraid to stir out of doors.

"This condition of things cannot endure any longer, and I have decided to appeal to you. I remember how fond you were of Clarence, and also how kind you have been to me, and so I feel sure that, if it is possible, you will come to me, here at my home.

"Most sincerely yours,

"Mabel Vaughan."

It was Saturday morning when the detective received the letter, and on the following morning, immediately after his breakfast, he started for Loyola Park, with Danny Maloney for his chauffeur.

The distance is considerable, so it was almost noon when he arrived at the stately mansion which the Vaughans had called home for five generations.

It is pertinent, too, to say a word right here about that same mansion.

The original house, a square and ugly edifice of rough stone, was erected by Gerald Vaughan in 1755; it had descended from Gerald to his son William in 1780, and William, having inherited a considerable fortune with the house, had built large additions to it, entirely changing its appearance. In the year 1810 William had shuffled off the mortal coil, and left his home, with all its appurtenances and belongings, to his son Charles; and Charles had built more additions to the house, adding a turret here and a tower there, and entirely altering its

outward appearance, although, be it said, the original of the very old house in the center of the structure remained unchanged—inside, at least.

In the year 1835 Clarence Vaughan's father, who was the second Gerald, inherited the property, together with a vast fortune; and again a horde of workmen had entered upon the place, changing and adding to the huge pile.

Clarence Vaughan was only ten years old when his father died; his sister Mabel was barely two, and the great property had been left equally to the two children, for the mother had died when she brought Mabel into the world.

And now Clarence Vaughan was dead, having been murdered with poison administered by one Melville Birge,* who had already been convicted and sentenced to the death-chair.

But now this strange old house, with all its curious history and all the immense wealth that went with it, amounting to millions, had fallen to the possession of a girl who was just past her twenty-second birthday—Mabel Vaughan.

There had been a conspiracy against the Vaughans, brother and sister, to despoil them of their wealth; a conspiracy hatched and almost carried out by that same Melville Bergen to whom reference has just been made—and that it had not succeeded was due entirely to the timely intervention of Nick Carter.

When Nick turned into the winding driveway which led from the main road to the mansion, he found himself going over in his mind the history of the old residence, as Clarence Vaughan had once recited it to him; and one statement that was made at the time recurred to him at the moment. It was:

"I haven't a doubt, Nick, but what that great-great-great-grandfather of mine, old Gerald, was a pretty bad egg in his day, and I have always believed that the foundation of the fortune I now enjoy was rather shady. Anyhow, there are a lot of mysteries about the old house which I wish I knew about."

"Mysteries?" Nick had asked him at the time.

"Yes. There used to be an old servant in the family, named Pedro Pasquale. He had been a confidential servant of my father's. I have always thought, from dark hints that Pedro used to throw out when I was a boy, that he had some dark secret to reveal to me when I should have arrived at a certain age—but Pedro disappeared when I was fifteen. We never knew what had become of him."

"Disappeared?" Nick had asked again. "How?"

"Went up in smoke, I suppose, or something like that. He was noticed around the house an hour before his disappearance—and after that he was never seen again by anybody."

*See Nick Carter Weekly, No. 548.

Somehow, this conversation, almost forgotten, recurred to the detective that Sunday morning while Danny was driving him toward Loyola Park, and now, as he turned into the drive, he wondered if the terrors to which Mabel had referred in her letter could by any possibility have any connection with that ancient history of the family.

But the car swept around a bend of the road and glided under the porte-cochère before he had time to seek for an answer, and old Simpson, the butler, came out of the great front door to bid him welcome.

"Miss Vaughan is expecting you, Mr. Carter," he said, rubbing his hands together, for the old servant was fond of Nick. "She is in the library. I am to take you directly to——"

"No; I am not in the library. I am here," came a voice from the doorway, and Mabel herself came out upon the steps, with both hands extended in welcome to the detective.

"It was so good of you to come," she said, raising her matchless eyes to his; and there was a wonderful charm about Mabel Vaughan; a charm that was not beauty of feature alone, but which breathed in her presence, sounded in her voice, looked out of her eyes, and dwelt with her always.

"I think it was good of you to ask me to come," replied the detective, following her into the house. "It is a beautiful day, and it is Sunday. I should not have known what to do with myself if it had not been for your letter. It happens that every one of my assistants are away, and that I was quite alone—so you see you have really done a charitable thing in asking me here. It doesn't seem possible that any terrors can exist for you in a place so beautiful as this, Mabel."

She had been smiling upon him, but now her face clouded and a hunted look came into her eyes.

"Don't let us refer to that—yet, please," she said hastily. "Let us keep it until after dinner."

"As you please, Mabel."

"I have ordered dinner for one o'clock, knowing that you would be hungry after your journey. After that, while you smoke, we can talk over all the disagreeable things."

And so it was not until after dinner was disposed of that the subject uppermost in the minds of both was mentioned at all; then Mabel said to him:

"Now, if you please, I want you to come with me to my own private sitting-room, on the second floor. I feel more at home there than anywhere else in this great house. I can talk much more freely there—and you may smoke your cigar just the same."

"Thank you," he replied; and followed her up the wide stairway.

"You are in no hurry to return, are you?" she asked as they seated themselves. "I hope you are not."

"No. I have plenty of time at my disposal—and Joseph knows where I am if I should be wanted. He would telephone, you know."

"Yes. That means that you have no engagements for to-day, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"And how about to-morrow?"

"Well, I have no engagements for to-morrow, either. But why do you ask about to-morrow?"

"Because I want to prevail upon you to remain here until to-morrow, or the day after, if it is possible for you to do so. You shall have Clarence's old room, and with Simpson to wait upon you, you will be very comfortable. Simpson will take care of Danny for you, too."

"You have some especial reason for wishing me to remain, more than the mere desire for my society, I take it," replied Nick, with a smile.

"Indeed, I have. I think I will get one night of good rest if I know that you are in the house to protect me."

"To protect you, Mabel? To protect you from what?"

"From the mysteries, the terrors, the *horrors* that haunt this place, and that have haunted it for the last two weeks."

The detective regarded her narrowly and seriously.

"I hope," he said, "that you have not permitted your imagination to play tricks with you, Mabel."

She shook her head emphatically, but without other reply; and he added:

"You know, my dear friend, that you have been through a great deal in the last month, and even though you are a very self-poised young woman, you still have nerves."

"It is not my imagination," she replied, with low emphasis. "But there is something that is going on in this house nightly that frightens me—that fills me with an unnamable terror—that horrifies me in spite of my better judgment."

"What is it?"

"Of course you do not believe in ghosts; of course I do not believe in them. And yet——"

"And yet—what?"

"And yet I might well believe, from what I have seen and heard, that this house has suddenly become haunted by a colony of ghosts who are determined to drive me away from it—or worse."

"A colony of ghosts, eh?" Nick smiled. "That is rather an original idea. What sort of ghosts? Whose ghosts are they?"

"You must not make fun of me, Nick, for I am in deadly earnest. I have stood it just as long as I could, determined that I would not be frightened. You know that I am no weakling, if I am a girl. My brother used to tell me that I was almost as fearless as a man. I have always supposed that I was so—until now."

"And now?"

"Now I have to confess to myself and to you that I am miserably afraid."

"But afraid of what, Mabel?"

"Of the ghosts. Of what they threaten; of what they may do to me. I am afraid, afraid, afraid—horribly afraid."

"I believe, Mabel, that you are overwrought. I think that perhaps you should——"

"I tell you it is *not* my imagination. It is all very real. The house is haunted by something; but whether it is by ghosts, or by men and women in flesh and blood, I do not know. I only know I am afraid. That is why I sent the appeal for you to come here."

"Well, now that I am here, will you promise not to be afraid any more?" he smiled at her.

"Yes; while you are here."

"And now, if you please, I will ask you to tell me all about it. I must know exactly what it is that is troubling you."

CHAPTER II.

NIGHTS OF HORROR.

"It will be two weeks to-morrow night since it began," said Mabel.

"Since what began?"

"These visitations that I am to tell you about."

"And how did they begin?"

"I was awakened in the middle of the night by feeling a cold, wet, clammy hand passed across my face. I——"

"You were in your own bed?"

"Of course. It was in the middle of the night."

"Well, continue."

"I was startled wide-awake instantly, and I tried to rise—to leap from the bed and to scream out; but I was prevented from doing either one."

"How?"

"Something or somebody held me down tightly on my back in the bed; another hand was pressed over my mouth. I could neither struggle nor cry out. I was utterly helpless—as helpless as if a giant were holding me."

"Did you *see* nothing?"

"I could see very dimly the outlines of two figures standing beside my bed. My first idea was that burglars had somehow entered the house, and had penetrated to my room, although I always lock the door of my room carefully."

"It is a very easy matter to turn a key in a lock from the wrong side of a door, Mabel," said the detective. "One needs only to have the necessary implement."

"I do not lock my door with a key. I bolt it."

"Well, go on."

"My first idea was that they were burglars, and, of course, I was frightened that they should venture to waken me; and then, of a sudden, a light was flashed

across my bed from the opposite side of it, straight upon the features of the person—if person it was—who still held that cold and moist hand against my forehead."

She shuddered as she said this, and Nick could see that the experience had been a terrible one for her to pass through. He wisely kept silence until she was ready to resume.

"It was a horrible face," she said at last. "It was the face of a woman, but it was also the face of a corpse. It was white and drawn and haggard, with staring, glassy eyes and expressionless face. The sight of it was so horrible that I fainted."

"Fainted away? Became unconscious?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"When I came to myself again dawn was at hand. It was not exactly daylight, but it was rapidly becoming so."

"And you remembered?"

"The horror of it was still with me. I leaped from my bed and ran to the door. I do not know what I intended to do when I had opened it, but I was brought to my senses by the discovery that my door was exactly as I had left it when I went to bed; that is, it was bolted on the inside."

Nick nodded.

"It was instantly plain to me that whoever it was that had been in my room during the night, they had not entered by that door," she continued. "Daylight gives one courage. Having found that my door was bolted as I had left it upon retiring, I began to wonder if I had not dreamed it all—if it had not been a horrible nightmare."

The detective nodded again.

"Really," she went on, "I was in doubt about it; so much in doubt that I at last determined that I *had* dreamed it."

"Is that door to which you refer the only one which gives access to your sleeping-room?" asked the detective.

"No; there are two others. This room in which we are seated is a part of my personal suite. Beyond this room is my dressing-room; beyond that is the bath; next beyond that is my sleeping-room, and still beyond that is a room where my maid sleeps—when I have one. It happens that I am without a maid just now."

"So, in fact, your sleeping-room has three doors leading into it?"

"Yes."

"Were all of those doors fastened?"

"Each one of them was fastened in the same manner, by being bolted on the inside. You see, when I considered all that, it convinced me that my experience was not a real one, notwithstanding the vividness of it."

The detective nodded his head.

"I succeeded in convincing myself of that idea, at least—and I said absolutely nothing about my experiences to anybody. Of course, there was no one to whom I could tell it, save Simpson, or Mrs. Drew——"

"Who is Mrs. Drew?"

"She is a woman whom I have asked to live with me since the death of Clarence. She ostensibly fills the position of housekeeper, although Simpson really sees to all that. She is more a guest than anything else; but a guest who will remain as long as I wish her to do so, you know."

"Do you know about her? Do you know who and what she is?"

"Perfectly. I have known her ever since I can remember."

"Oh! That is all right, then. Go ahead with your story, please."

"I must confess that it was with some trepidation that I retired to my room the succeeding night, notwithstanding the fact that I had convinced myself that it was all a dream."

"But you forced yourself to do so?"

"Yes; and the night passed without incident, so you see I was thoroughly convinced then that it was all the result of my imagination. But when the second night came—oh, it was awful!"

"What was awful, Mabel?"

"I was awakened again, in the middle of the night, by the touch of that same clammy hand upon my face. I started wide-awake, as before, and, as before, to find that I was held down upon the bed by invisible hands, which refused to release me and against which it was useless to struggle.

"Again the light flashed across the bed upon that horrible countenance—the same one that I have already described to you. It is like a dead face—like the face of a corpse—of a person who has been dead for several days, so that discoloration has begun. It is too horrible to describe to you.

"I tried to scream out, and could not do so. If I had, it would have done no good, for nobody was near enough to me to have heard me."

"What was it that seemed to hold you down upon the bed, Mabel?"

"The first time—that first night—I thought it was human hands. The second time it appeared as if something had been passed across me which bound me in my place, as if a weight were upon me. But let me continue."

"Go on."

"I have told you about the light shining upon that horrible face. It remained there perhaps a minute, and then it went out as suddenly as it had appeared. But a moment passed only before it appeared a second time, and this time it shone straight across the foot of the bed, and upon a face"—she shuddered, and for a moment stopped,

as if to collect herself—"and upon a face that was like, and yet not like, my brother."

"Clarence?"

"Yes."

"But surely you knew that it could not be Clarence?"

"Of course I knew that it could not be Clarence. I don't think it was even intended that I should suppose it to be Clarence. It had only been made grotesquely like him in order to frighten me the more—in order to make the visitation the more horrible. But there the light shone steadily, never wavering, until the horror of it overcame me so that I did as I had done that other time—fainted."

"And then?"

"It was broad daylight and the sun was shining in at the window when I came to my senses again and struggled out of the bed."

"How about the doors this time?"

"The doors this time were as they had been before. Each one was securely bolted on the inside, and not one of them bore the slightest evidence of having been disturbed."

"I suppose you could no longer accept the theory of nightmare, to explain what had happened?"

"No. I knew better than that now."

"Did you tell Mrs. Drew or Simpson about it?"

"I told nobody. I kept my own counsel—but I resolved not to sleep in my own room that night."

"You thought you would dodge these spirits that were haunting you?"

"You may call it that if you like," she replied, smiling wanly. "I said nothing about my intention to any person in the house, not even to the maid who cares for the rooms; but on my own initiative I arranged one of the guest's chambers for my accommodation—one of the rooms that has only one door, and one that I could fasten securely.

"When it came time for me to retire, I went to that room, and feeling strangely secure, although I will confess that I was nervous, I dropped asleep after a time; and now comes one of the strangest features of this remarkable series of incidents."

"What is it now?"

"I slept well and soundly all night. I did not awaken—I was not awakened at all during the night—*but in the morning, when I did open my eyes, I was in my own room, in my own bed!*"

"What?"

"It is true. Absolutely true."

"Do you mean that you went to sleep in the guest-chamber, and that you awoke in your own room the next morning?"

"That is exactly what I do mean."

"And you were not disturbed at all during the night?"

"Not at all!"

"Do you ever walk in your sleep?"

"I expected that question; but it is no case of sleep-walking. I was *carried* in my sleep from one room to the other. I was taken from one bed and deposited in the other, and it was done without my knowing a thing about it."

"Did you have a headache in the morning? Was there any feeling about you to indicate that possibly you had been partly chloroformed, or something of that sort?"

"No. I felt normal. But I have not done yet, Nicholas."

"Well, go on."

"That night I tried another room—a different one, I mean. I went off into another wing of the house, locked myself in, and barricaded the door. Then, instead of going to bed, I put out the lights and seated myself in a chair in one corner of the room, fully dressed. I was determined to watch all night, to see what would happen if anything."

"Well?"

"I suppose I got tired of watching. I suppose I must have dropped asleep in that chair. Anyhow, I lost consciousness; and when I awoke——"

"Well?"

"When I awoke I was again in my own bed, in my own room. I had not only been carried to my own room from that distant wing of the house, *but I had literally been undressed and put to bed by the persons—or ghosts—who did it.*"

CHAPTER III.

A HOUSE OF MYSTERY.

The detective could only stare in amazement in response to this astounding statement.

"Go on," he said presently. "Tell me all there is to tell."

"There isn't very much more to tell you," replied Mabel wearily. "The rest of the events that have happened have been largely repetitions of those I have already told you about."

"Has something happened to you every night since these things began?" he asked.

"No, not every night. For instance, the night following the one I have just described, I was desperate, as well as frightened. I thought at first that I would not go to bed at all. I thought of sending for you, but I ended by going to the room of Mrs. Drew, and passing the night with her."

"And nothing happened?"

"Nothing happened at all—that night, or the next, or the one following that. I was left for three nights undisturbed."

"And then?"

"Then I returned to my own room again, but only to have a repetition of my former experiences."

"The same as the first two that you have described to me?"

"Precisely the same; only that I thought——"

"Thought what, Mabel?"

"Do you remember that woman who worked here once as a housemaid? The woman whose name was Susan Gross, and who turned out to be a sister of Melville Bergen's?"*

"Yes."

"Well, in that corpselike face that always appeared at my bedside I fancied that I saw a resemblance to that woman."

"Ah," said the detective. "That may prove to be interesting before we have done with this affair—for, of course, you must understand as well as I that these things could not have occurred to you without human agency."

"Certainly."

"Is there more to tell me about it?"

"Yes."

"Go on, then."

"When I found that I was again troubled in my own room, I returned to Mrs. Drew—to sleep with her, and again there were three nights without molestation. But I remained with her, and the fourth night something happened."

"Tell me what it was."

"It was merely that when I awoke in the morning I was in bed in my own room; that I had been taken from Mrs. Drew's bed in the night, and carried to my own bed; that it was done without disturbing me, and without waking Mrs. Drew. In the morning she charged me with having deserted her during the night, and that without disturbing her. And that happened twice again, afterward—and that is why I have sent for you. If I were compelled to face these terrors alone any longer I should go mad—and somehow I have come to the conclusion that the whole thing is an effort to drive me mad."

"You have proved yourself to be an unusually courageous young woman, Mabel."

"Perhaps. I do not know. I seemed to have no place to fly to. I realized that I had not been actually harmed, and I figured that they did not intend to do me bodily harm. But I have withstood it just as long as I can. But I want to say this:"

"Well?"

"Every time I have seen that corpselike face, it has reminded me more and more of the woman Susan Gross. Is she not in prison?"

"No."

"She was arrested with the others."

"Yes; but she turned State's evidence against her brother, and because of the testimony she gave she was released. It has been generally supposed that she left the country."

"And that other woman—Bergen's wife, was she not?—Imogene Mallory, she called herself—what became of her?"

"You know she was not really guilty of anything at all, but inasmuch as she had criminal knowledge of her husband's crimes, after the fact, she was sent to prison for one year."

"Then she is in prison now?"

"Yes."

"But Susan Gross is at liberty?"

"Yes."

"Then depend upon it, Mr. Carter, Susan Gross is the prime mover in this affair; *only*——"

"What were you about to say?"

"Only there is one thing which to me is utterly inexplicable. How was it possible for human beings to enter rooms where the doors were bolted on the inside, and to leave those rooms again without disturbing the bolts?"

"That, possibly," said the detective, smiling, "may not be as great a mystery as we imagine. On my way out here to-day, something reminded me of a story that your brother once told me about this house. I think I would like to ask you some questions about that, Mabel."

"Yes?" she replied. "If there is anything that I can tell you please ask me."

"Do you know anything about the history of your family? I refer to your grandfathers, as far as three or four generations back."

"I am afraid that I know very little."

"Perhaps you know more about it than you think you do."

"Possibly. I know that Clarence and I used often to discuss those things with great gravity when we were children. Clarence was eight years older than I. My mother died at my birth, and when our father died, I was two and Clarence was ten years old."

"Yes. I know that already. Did you ever know anything about an old servant of your father's whose name was Pedro Pasquale?"

"Oh, yes. He disappeared very mysteriously when I was about seven years old. I can just remember him."

"If you were seven, your brother was fifteen when Pedro disappeared."

"Yes."

"Of course you have no personal knowledge concerning Pedro; but will you try to recall for me things that have been said about him to you? Either by your brother or by any member of the household who may have known him."

"Simpson knew him. Simpson could tell you more about him than I—if you can make Simpson talk about him. But always when Clarence or I mentioned the name

*See No. 548 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "A Dead Man at the Feast."

of Pedro, Simpson has shaken his head moodily, grumbled out something about the devil, and left us. Neither of us could ever induce Simpson to talk about Pedro."

"Well, I will endeavor to induce him to talk later. Just now I want you to give me your own impressions about the matter."

"Will you tell me why, Mr. Carter? I don't see what Pedro could have to do with these present events. It is fifteen years since he disappeared——"

"You must pardon me, Mabel; but you know that detectives sometimes have strange and incomprehensible methods for getting at things. If an evil exists, it is well, if possible, to ascertain the source of that evil. For instance, your brother gave me to understand that the old servant of your father carried about with him some secret which he was to impart to his young master when Clarence should have arrived at a certain age. Pedro disappeared before Clarence heard that secret. Do you know anything about that?"

"I only know that Clarence has often told me the same thing which he told you. He was always wondering what that secret was. Did you know that Clarence always insisted that this house was haunted, and that that was why he would not live here?"

"No."

"He did."

"Do you know if he had any reason for that belief?"

"No. Only he used to say that old Gerald Vaughan—our great-grandfather three times back, had been a pirate of some kind—but of course that was idle folly."

"I'm not so sure of that. At the time he lived, the dividing line between a privateersman and a pirate was very hard to find."

"Well, Clarence always spoke of old Gerald as 'that old pirate.' He always insisted that this house—that is, the old part of it—was honeycombed with secret passages and vaults, and he always believed that treasure is concealed somewhere about the old place. But I never paid any attention to such things."

"You were always too practical."

"I suppose so."

"What is your general impression of old Pedro Pasquale, as derived from all the things you have heard about him since your infancy? What is your personal idea of him? Try to picture him as standing before you, just as you have thought of him, and describe that picture to me."

She was silent a moment, and then, rather dreamily, she said:

"I see a very, very old man—a man so old that he did not know his age, or, if he did, refused to tell it to others. He was probably past ninety at the time of his disappearance."

"And that was fifteen years ago, so we can figure that he would be about a hundred and five now. Take twenty off of that for usefulness—for he could not have done much before he was twenty—that would bring him into your family about the year 1820. That would be during the life of your great-grandfather, who was the son of the 'old pirate.'"

"That is true," she admitted. "I had not thought of it in that way before."

"Please go on with your description of him."

"I seem to remember his piercing black eyes, which glittered so strangely. I remember that all the servants in the house were afraid of him. I used to hear them talk about him. He was a strange old man who never spoke unless he was addressed, and then would answer with a monosyllable if he could.

"I remember hearing, too, that he was in the habit of disappearing for days at a time, and then reappearing again as suddenly as he had gone—until finally he disappeared and never returned. Clarence used to talk to me about him a good deal when we were both young."

"Tell me what Clarence said."

"Clarence always said that Pedro had been a pirate, too, in his early days, and that he was a sort of heirloom that had been handed down in the family from generation to generation, as if he were a brooch or a jewel. Pedro was always devoted to Clarence. He fairly worshiped him. Clarence used to tell me that himself; and he was the only one in the house whom Pedro would serve."

"Did any one ever tell you anything about those disappearances of Pedro's? What was the manner of his disappearing? Have you been told that?"

"Why, he would be seen about the house, and of a sudden he would be missing. Nobody ever saw him go; nobody ever saw him return."

"Then it is more than likely, isn't it, that this house does contain secret passages and secret chambers?"

"I suppose so. I never gave the subject any thought. Clarence used to. I have known him to spend hours searching for them. In fact he never came here that he did not go about as if he were looking for one of them. He always believed——"

"What?"

"That old Pedro had died suddenly in one of them, and that the secret he was to impart to my brother was down underneath the house somewhere with the bones of Pedro Pasquale."

"Perhaps your brother was right about that, too."

"Perhaps."

"It is quite evident, Mabel, that there are such passages in this house, else those people who have been disturbing you could not have entered locked rooms. And if they are here, we will find them."

CHAPTER IV.

THE KEEPER OF A FAMILY SECRET.

"You will not leave me until this mystery is solved, will you, Mr. Carter?" Mabel asked him when there was a momentary pause in their conversation.

"No," he replied promptly, "I will not. You may rest perfectly assured of that, Mabel. I will stay here and protect you until we lay those ghosts by the heels; and now, I want to have a talk with old Simpson."

"I could not stand any more of it alone," she said. "I have got to the end of my resources, as far as courage is concerned. I think—I really think that in time they would have driven me mad."

"I have no doubt of it. The wonder is that you stood it as long as you did. And now, I will go and find Simpson."

"Would you rather I would send him to you here?"

"No; you remain here in your own room; or, better still, as it is a pleasant day, let Danny take you for a ride in the automobile. By the way, this house stands on a very high bluff over the Sound. How far do you call it from here to the water?"

"I think it is generally supposed to be about a quarter of a mile, or a little more."

"There is a good anchorage down there in the little bay, isn't there?"

"Yes. A very good one. Clarence frequently brought his yacht there, until he sold it, last year.

"There is a path from here directly to the water's edge, isn't there? A short cut?"

"Yes. It takes you to the top of the bluff, and there steps have been cut in the rocks down the face of the cliff; and there are iron rings to grasp while you are making the descent. But it is a perilous place. I have always preferred to go around."

"Thank you. Danny will be ready for you in ten minutes, and will take you wherever you wish to go."

"Does that mean that you *wish me to go?* That you want to get rid of me for a time?" she asked of him smilingly.

"It means more than anything else that you need the ride in the open air to bring the color back to your cheeks. It means that you need a change and that the ride will do you good. Let it go at that."

"Very well. I will be ready in ten minutes, then."

Nick left her and went in search of Danny, whom he told to give the young lady a good long ride for an hour or two; and then he waited until they had started before he began his interview with Simpson.

But as soon as the automobile had gone he called Simpson into the little reception-room off the main hall.

"Simpson," he said, smiling upon the old man who had served the family so long a time, "I think I am right in supposing that you have some personal liking for me, am I not?"

"Indeed you are, Mr. Carter. It is a strange question for you to ask of me, sir."

"I know it is; but I shall ask you some stranger ones before I am through. Did Miss Mabel tell you that she had sent for me to come here?"

"She did, sir."

"Did she tell you why she had sent for me?"

"She did not, sir."

"Have you not noticed lately that she is not looking at all well. That, in fact, she has the appearance of a person who has something on her mind?"

"Yes, sir; and it has worried me greatly."

"You don't believe in ghosts do you, Simpson?"

The old man raised a startled face to the detective, and repeated after him:

"*Ghosts,* sir?"

"Yes—ghosts. You don't believe in the existence of ghosts, do you?"

"Well, sir, I don't know. I have seen some strange things in my time——"

"Here in this house, Simpson?"

"Here and in other places as well, sir."

"Will you keep a secret if I will tell you one, Simpson?"

"Yes, sir."

"Miss Mabel thinks that she has been seeing ghosts."

"Lately, sir?" was the quiet and rather surprising question from the old man.

"Yes—lately," replied Nick, puzzled by his manner.

Simpson shook his head emphatically.

"I haven't seen any—lately," he murmured, more to himself than to the detective.

"Do you mean by that remark, Simpson, that you *have* seen what you suppose to be ghosts, in this house, *ever?*"

"Yes, sir; it does."

"When?"

"Not for a great many years, sir."

"How many years?"

"Twenty, maybe; perhaps not so long; perhaps longer."

"What sort of ghosts, Simpson?"

"I didn't suppose that there was more than one sort, sir—disembodied spirits."

"Humph!" said the detective. "Well, we will return to that part of the subject later on. Just at present there are other things that I wish to talk about. And I want you to be perfectly frank with me, will you, Simpson? That is why I asked you if you liked me."

"Yes, sir. I will be frank with you. I will do anything for you or for Miss Mabel."

"I realize that. How old are you, Simpson?"

"Nearly seventy, sir."

"And how long have you been employed in this family?"

"My father and mother were here before me, sir. I was practically born in the family, you might say."

"Probably you remember Mabel's grandfather, then, eh?"

"I do indeed, sir, only I was a mere lad when he died."

"Tell me something about him, Simpson."

"I can tell you very little about him, Mr. Carter. He was a very stern man; a very dark and handsome man, although his hair was as white as snow, as I remember him. I remember also that he was very profane. He was very strict with Mr. Gerald—that was Miss Mabel's father, you know, sir."

"Yes. Old Pedro Pasquale had been a servant of the grandfather, had he not?" asked Nick.

Instantly Simpson froze. He shrugged his shoulders and replied rather coldly:

"I had much rather not talk about Pedro if you don't mind, sir."

"But Pedro is exactly the person whom I wish you to talk about, Simpson," expostulated Nick. "But I will change the subject for a moment. You know, do you not, that there are secrets—very old secrets—connected with this house?"

"Yes," replied Simpson.

"Do you know any of those secrets yourself?"

"Not one of them."

"How, then, do you know that they exist?"

"Because I have been told so by persons who did know them."

"Who, for example?"

"Miss Mabel's father—and Pedro, if I must mention him."

"Do you know to what those secrets relate?"

"Vaguely."

"Let me have it then, as you know it."

Simpson hesitated. He looked keenly at the detective, and seemed to be turning something over in his mind that was of vast importance, at least to himself; at last he asked:

"Do you think I would be betraying confidence that was imposed in me many years ago, if I should talk frankly to you, sir?"

"I do not, under the circumstances. The persons to whom you would refer are long since dead. It is the living whom you must consider. It is Miss Mabel."

"If Miss Mabel were in any sort of danger——"

"She *is* in very great danger."

"How, sir? From what? From whom?"

"I don't know from what, or from whom. I only know that for the past two weeks she has been haunted night after night by people who gain access to this house by means of the secret passages that are under it and through the walls. Is it possible, Simpson, that you have lived on this place all these years, and have never yet found one of those secret passages?"

"It is not only possible, but it is true, sir; and yet I know they exist."

"Why have you never made an effort to discover any of them?"

"Because on my father's death-bed I promised him that I would not do so."

"Why did he ask such a promise of you?"

"He gave me only one reason."

"What was that?"

"My personal safety and my contentment through life. He told me then that if I permitted my curiosity to get the best of me, and attempted to penetrate mysteries which did not and could not concern me, I would regret it to the end of my days; and he asked me to promise that I would devote my life and services to the master without trying to penetrate any of the master's secrets."

"And you promised?"

"I promised."

"Now, for Mabel's sake, tell me about Pedro."

"What do you wish to know about him?"

"Who and what was he?"

"He was a mystery. I think he was a Portuguese by birth."

"He had been a long time associated with the family, had he not?"

"Since his early youth, and he was a very old man when he disappeared."

"How old?"

"Long past ninety."

"And it is fifteen years since he disappeared?"

"Yes."

"Simpson, your young master now dead, Clarence, once told me that he believed that some secret had been entrusted to Pedro, which he was to impart to Clarence when he should have arrived at a certain age. It was Clarence's idea that Pedro disappeared before that time came, but Clarence always believed that it was intended by his father that some day he should be made acquainted with those secrets. Do you know if that is true?"

"I know that it is true; yes, sir."

"But you do not know what it was that Pedro was to impart to his young master?"

"No."

"What do you know about the disappearance of Pedro?"

"Nothing."

"But you must know something about it. You were here, in the house at the time, were you not?"

"Yes. I was the last person to see Pedro before—before he went away."

"Did he say that he was going away?"

"He said—must I tell you, sir?"

"Yes."

"He came to me that day, in this room. He said that he was going into the secret passages of the house for the proofs of the story that he must relate to Master Clarence that night. He told me that he was ill and that

he might not have the strength to return alone, and he begged me to go with him. I refused. He went—and he never returned."

CHAPTER V.

PEDRO PASQUALE'S MISSION.

"So," said the detective, smiling grimly, "that is the reason, is it, why you have never wished to talk about Pedro?"

"Yes, sir. That is the reason."

"I suppose you have felt in a measure responsible for his death."

"I have felt that if I had consented to go with him, he would have escaped—that I might have assisted him back again. Oh, sir, I have wondered all these years what it was that happened to him down there among those secret vaults and chambers, under the house, or in the cliff that is below the house. I have wondered if he dropped dead in his tracks and so did not suffer, or if he merely fell from weakness, and died after part of starvation, because nobody would get to him to save him. That is the reason—that I refused to accompany him at that time."

"Why did you refuse?"

"Because of the promise I had made to my master—never to leave any of the secrets of the place."

"It was the very time, too, when Pedro was to tell young Clarence the message left to him by his father."

"Yes. It was Mr. Clarence's fifteenth birthday."

"I tell me what Pedro said to you when he went to you to ask you to accompany him."

"He said: 'Peter'—that is my first name, sir—'Peter, you are an old and a faithful servant to the family. The time has come when I must take you into my confidence.'

"'I want none of your confidences,' I told him; but he only smiled in that devilish way of his and replied:

"'It is no my confidences that I am asking you to receive, but your loyalty.'

"'Neither do I wish his confidences—unless he chooses to give them to me himself,' I replied to him again.

"'I am not referring to the young master, but to the one who is dead,' he retorted.

"'It is the same thing,' I told him.

"'Come,' he said then, 'let us have no foolishness. This is the fifteenth birthday of the young master. To-night I must fulfil his father's wishes concerning him. I am [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

"That is why I do not like to hear Pedro's name mentioned. That is why—but you understand me now, sir."

"Yes. I think I do. Tell me this:"

"Well, sir?"

"Pedro threatened to haunt you. Has he done so?"

"No, sir. Only in dreams. For years I used to wake in the night, believing that he stood beside my bed, and I used to fancy that I could see him lurking in dark corners when I went about the house at night. But that was only fancy. I got over it, and gradually the fear of him went out of me. But always I have felt that remorse for my refusal to go with him."

"If you had consented, Pedro would have returned and told his tale to Clarence."

"Yes. I suppose so. And I have thought all these years——"

"Well, Simpson?"

"I have thought of him as falling upon his face from weakness, down there in one of those secret chambers where nobody could find him—and that probably he starved to death. Oh, it has been terrible, and fifteen years have not cured me of the feeling."

"Was that the only time when Pedro ever referred to the family secret to you?"

"Yes. The one and only time."

"And until then, had you known that there was one?"

"Of course. My father told me that."

"Did you ever have any idea what it might be about?"

"None whatever."

"Well, Simpson, now I must tell you something. Those secrets, whatever they are—or at least a part of them—have become known to outsiders. There is some one—there are several persons who are now haunting those secret passages and chambers that lie under this old mansion. Those persons, whoever they are, are trying to drive your young mistress mad. They have entered her room at night, by stealth, and frightened her. Don't you think that it is time that you forgot that promise made to your father and help me to unravel all these mysteries?"

"I am willing, sir, if you say it is my duty."

"I do say so, most emphatically."

"Then I will help you; but I doubt if I can be of any assistance."

"You know the house and all of its ramifications?"

"Yes, sir."

"And already you have given me some little assistance, since you have told me that Pedro made his last disappearance through the drawing-room."

Simpson smiled.

"It may be that will help you, sir," he said, "but to my mind it would have made no difference to him what room he entered. I think he would have found his way to the region below just the same. I do not believe there is a room in the house which has not its secret connection with those underground passages. He entered through the drawing-room only because that room happened to be the nearest one to him when we had finished our conversation together."

"Simpson, do you remember Susan Gross?"

"I should say that I do remember her, sir. The huzzy!"

"She was a mysterious woman, Simpson."

"Indeed she was, sir. I always hated her, even before I knew that she was a sister to the man who killed Mr. Clarence."

"How long was she here in the house as a servant, Simpson?"

"About a month, sir."

"Now, carry your mind back to the time when she was here. Try to remember all that you can concerning her and tell me if there was ever a time when *she* mysteriously disappeared from your sight. Disappeared, I mean, in a way that brought to your mind the doings of old Pedro Pasquale?"

Simpson gave a violent start and looked at the detective for a moment without replying; then he said:

"Yes; there were two or three times. I don't think that I paid much attention to them at the time, supposing that it was my eyesight that was at fault; but now that you speak of it, I shouldn't wonder——"

"Let me interrupt you, Simpson. I have some reason to believe that she stumbled upon one of those secret passages by accident while she was here."

"Why do you think that, sir?"

"Because I think I have reason to believe that she is the one who is frightening your young mistress."

"Curse her!"

"With all my heart, Simpson; but that does not help us. The point is that what she could discover by accident I ought to be able to find by searching for it. I want you to tell me where she was those times when you thought she disappeared."

"She was both times in the drawing-room, sir."

"Again the drawing-room."

"Yes."

"Then that would seem to be the most likely place for us to search."

"Would you like to begin it now, sir?"

"No. I shall do nothing to-day or to-night. I shall do nothing toward looking for the secret passages until to-morrow; but then I shall begin early in the morning, and I desire you to assist me all the day."

"Yes, sir. I will do as you direct. But what of Miss Mabel, sir? Perhaps she could help us, too."

"I want Miss Mabel to have nothing to do with it—at least until after the secret is discovered. It may be something that she should not know."

"But she will be here. She will know that we are searching."

"I will send her away in the meanwhile in the morning.

as I have done this afternoon. I will send Danny with her, with instructions to keep her out nearly all the day, and I shall ask her to remain away. Then we will have a free hand to search all we please."

"Yes. That will be best."

"So, Simpson, try in the meantime to remember everything connected with your long life in this family which would be calculated to assist us in our search. Will you do that?"

"I will, sir."

CHAPTER VI.

NICK CARTER'S MIDNIGHT VIGIL.

There was still more than an hour of daylight left when Danny returned with Mabel in the automobile.

The detective welcomed her, told her that now it was his turn and that he was going to take Danny for a walk; and then having promised that he would return in time for tea, he started with his young chauffeur afoot across the [illegible] to the top of the cliff.

It was, as Mabel had said, a distance of about a quarter of a mile.

On the way to the cliff, Nick said to Danny:

"My lad, everybody in my employ has to learn sooner or later to turn their heads and their brains to detective work. You are not to be exempt from that."

"Neither do I wish to be exempt, sir. It is my dearest wish that you would let me assist you whenever it is possible."

"Very well. Listen, then, and I will tell you the story of the present case."

He began then at the beginning and related to Danny all that Mabel had told him about her terrible experiences; he also told about Pedro and the supposition that there were secret chambers and passages beneath the mansion.

"Now, Danny," he said in conclusion, "you know as much about the case as I do. I have told you about it because I want the help of your wit in anything that it can suggest. I don't know how they intend to dispose of you to-night, but I shall suggest that you be permitted to have one of the rooms at the stable. I shall do that because I wish you to spend most of the night in keeping watch outside of the house, as I shall keep watch inside of it."

"I understand you, sir."

"If you should see a light at any window at an hour when it should not be there, I wish to know about it in the morning. If you should see any person prowling around the outside of the house, I wish you to capture that person and hold that person at all hazzards until I [illegible] had an opportunity to interview him or her, as the case may be."

"I'll do that, too, if I get the chance."

"I have an idea, Danny, that we are at this moment walking directly over one of those secret passages. The history of the family is that the man who began the building of that old house a hundred and sixty years ago was a privateersman; in other words, a pirate."

"Indeed, sir?"

"And it is quite likely that when he built the house he had a way of getting into it from his ship, which used to anchor yonder, without going overland."

"In other words, he went underland."

"Precisely."

They arrived now at the top of the cliff, and they looked over the brow of it upon as pretty a view as one may imagine. The little bay was directly below them—quite large enough and plenty deep enough to anchor a large vessel, and it was thoroughly sheltered from any wind that might blow.

"You see what an ideal spot that was, at that time, for a ship of the sort he sailed," said the detective. "It could not have been better."

"No."

"And with a house up there on the hill—the original house was simply a square one of stone—and a secret underground passage leading to it, he had everything almost as he wanted it."

"He certainly did."

"Let us go down a bit, Danny."

"How do we get down?"

"Somewhere over the brow of the cliff there are steps cut in the rocks, and there are iron rings to cling to as you descend. Here they are. Come."

The detective swung himself over the abyss and descended rapidly, presently coming out upon the narrow shingle which formed the beach.

Although he had descended rapidly, he had studied the appearance of the rock, all the way down; and nowhere had he seen any indication that it was false in any place.

"It doesn't look much as though there is a secret entrance through that cliff anywhere, does it, Danny?" he asked, backing away from it and searching the face of the cliff with his eyes.

"It does not, sir. Still, you never can tell."

"That's right, Danny; you never can tell until you have searched. Well, while I am searching inside the house, you shall search outside it. You can spend all the time down here you care to, when you are not otherwise employed; and if you should happen to find a place such as I have spoken of—well, it will be a great find for you, Danny."

"I'll try, Mr. Carter."

"Good! In the morning, after breakfast, I shall want you, however, to take Miss Vaughan for another ride. In other words, I want her out of the house while I am

making my search for the secret passages. I shall tell her why I want her to go."

"Very good, sir."

"We will return now."

After tea that night, Nick again repaired with Mabel to her private sitting-room. She said that she felt more at home there than anywhere else in the house. It was the room in which she passed almost all her time when alone.

"You may smoke," she told the detective, and he lighted a cigar. After a moment he said to her:

"Mabel, do you think you have the courage to sleep in your own room to-night? And are you willing that I should sit here in this room and keep watch?"

She looked up at him with a bright smile.

"I think," she said, "if you had left that first question without any addition to it, I should have answered No; but with the assurance that you will be in this room, I think I may say Yes."

"I will ask you," he continued, "to close and bolt all three of the doors that open upon your sleeping-room, just as you have been in the habit of doing. The door from this room into the dressing-room, and from the dressing-room into the bathroom, I will leave wide open, after you have retired."

"So that you can hear me in case I call out to you?"

"Yes. So that I can hear any noise whatever that may be made in your room."

"But if I should bolt my door from the bathroom into my room, how could you get to me, even if I should call?"

"That is true. I was only thinking of the propriety of the thing."

"I think, Mr. Carter, that I would feel safer, knowing that you are to be here, if I did *not* bolt my door into the bathroom."

"I think myself, that it would be better not."

"And if I am disturbed by another visitation——"

"Yes?"

"I shall manage somehow to call out to you."

"Good."

"I will utter one cry if I never utter another. One that you will hear."

"Good again."

"But will they see our light, if they should come? It would shine under the door."

"I shall sit here in the dark."

"Oh! And watch all night?"

"Yes."

"What a terrible lot of trouble I am putting you to."

"You need not think about that at all. I, on my part, feel almost guilty in asking you to venture to sleep in that room again, after all that has happened to you there."

"I shall feel perfectly safe with you so near to me—and with the door unbolted so that you can get to me if I call."

"Mabel, have you never until now felt at all afraid about staying in this big, mysterious house, practically alone, save for servants and such company as you had from time to time?"

"No. Why should I?"

"You have never been told tales about the house, then?"

"I have never been told any tales at all save those which Clarence and I used to talk over as children. But I used to think that Clarence did not like to stay here."

"I dare say."

"An old house like this one must have lots of secret things about it; but then this one is so large that I have never troubled my head about any part of it save that which I have used for my personal comforts. The rest of it has been left to the servants."

"I understand."

"I forgot to ask you if you asked Simpson about Pedro Pasquale?"

"Yes. I asked him."

"And would he talk about old Pedro?"

"Yes. He told me all he knew about him."

"Won't you tell me about it?"

"Another time, yes. To-night there is hardly time; and besides, after I have smoked another cigar, I want you to go to bed."

"It seems terrible that you should sit up all night."

"My dear girl, that is what I am here for."

And later, when Mabel had said good night and retired, the detective smoked another cigar, and sat under the light, reading for a long time; but at last, at about midnight, he extinguished the light, and having selected a chair to suit him, he carried it through into the dressing-room and seated himself close to the door to the bathroom—the open door.

Thus he was not ten feet away from the only door that separated him from the room where Mabel was by this time asleep, and he believed that he would be able to hear the slightest sound that could proceed from that room.

He wondered as he sat there if the people who were playing these tricks upon an unprotected girl knew of his presence in the house.

More than likely they did not know it, he thought. It was not at all probable that they prowled about the mansion by day, and therefore would not have been apprised of his coming.

It is a difficult thing to sit alone in the dark, with your whole energy bent upon hearing the slightest sound, and still to keep wide-awake.

Two or three times while the detective sat there, he caught himself nodding; but he was sure that he never quite fell into slumber.

Once he rose from his chair, and stepping forward across the tiled floor of the bathroom, pressed his ear

against the door of Mabel's room; but he heard nothing at all, and he resumed his seat.

He wished that he could smoke, but he knew that the smell of the tobacco would penetrate to that other room and would warn any midnight visitors who might venture there.

Oh, how he wished that they would come and that there would be noise enough so that he might know the moment of their arrival.

The hours passed slowly—very slowly indeed, and at the most conservative estimate he decided at last that it must be near dawn.

He rose from his chair intending to step to the window to look out. He had taken perhaps two steps in that direction, when from the adjoining room there arose a sudden cry—just one—but he knew it was in the voice of Mabel.

It was a call for help that was stifled in the utterance, so that it was only half-said; but it was enough for Nick Carter.

He turned and with one leap he reached the door and threw it open.

All was darkness within it; but he was prepared for that, and with another leap he was under the chandelier, had struck a match, and lighted the gas.

But the room was vacant.

Mabel Vaughan had disappeared.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MABEL.

For a moment the detective stood staring about him in amazement.

He did not believe that three seconds could have elapsed since he heard that cry from Mabel's lips, and yet already she was gone—spirited away as thoroughly as if she had been dematerialized and conveyed through the solid walls.

He crossed the room to the other doors and examined them.

They were both bolted on the inside, just as she had explained to the detective her way of doing them.

The bed upon which she had been lying seemed undisturbed, save that the clothing had been thrown back; but almost it there was no sign that there had been any struggle.

And yet Mabel Vaughan, who had been sleeping quietly and in evident security there but a moment ago, was gone.

It was unbelievable, almost.

Nick lighted every gas-burner in the room. There were six in the chandelier and two side-brackets. Altogether they made the room brilliant with light.

Then he began moving the furniture about.

He pulled the bureau from the wall; he pulled every article in that room away from the wall—and found nothing.

He examined the pictures that hung against the walls, even taking some of them down, and looking behind all of them. He found nothing but smooth walls for his efforts.

The entire floor was covered by one huge Persian rug, and now from every side of the room he rolled that rug back away from the mop-board—still there was nothing.

Then he went to one of the windows, and opening it, he called softly for Danny, whom he knew would be somewhere about, watching.

"Danny!" he called. "Danny!"

"Yes, sir. Here I am."

"Pick up a small stone down there, somewhere; one that will answer for a hammer for sounding walls; then go around to the side door. I will let you in."

"All right, sir," was the reply.

Nick left the lights as they were, and also the two other doors; he went out by the way he had entered, that is, through the bathroom, dressing-room, and sitting-room. And then he hurried down to the side door of the house and opened it to admit Danny.

"You saw nothing outside, I suppose, my lad?" he asked.

"Not a thing, sir."

"Well, something has happened inside, all right. Follow me. I will tell you about it when we get up-stairs."

He led the way back again toward the rooms already described. He entered at the sitting-room, where he had also lighted the gas as he came out, and he turned through the dressing-room toward the room from whence Mabel had so mysteriously disappeared.

At the door of the bathroom he paused suddenly.

"Did I close that door when I came out?" he asked himself, for the door into Mabel's room was closed.

No, he knew that he had not closed it; but it occurred to him that some draft might have blown it shut, and he stepped forward confidently to open it.

It resisted his efforts. It had been closed and bolted against him during the short period of his absence while he went to the side door of the house to admit Danny.

For a moment even Nick Carter was nonplused.

Whoever it was who had stolen Mabel away, had dared to return as soon as he had left the room, and close it and lock it against him.

It was a pitiful sort of a joke, and it made Nick Carter about as nearly angry as he ever permitted himself to become.

He shut his jaws together with determination, and then, catching the knob of the door with both hands, he raised his right knee and pressed it against the door at the exact spot where he knew the bolt to be located on the opposite side of it.

Then, with a one, two, three, he applied all his great strength, with the result that the socket of the bolt was torn from its place and the door swung open before him.

But the room was dark.

The people who had closed and bolted the door had also turned off all the lights.

However, it did not take long to light them again, and then Nick related what had happened.

"Danny," he said, "this is a house of mystery. I have done enough already to have found any ordinary secret passage leading from this room, and there isn't a sign of it anywhere. If it were not for the fact that I *know* it to be here, I should be inclined to believe that it is not here. But there is a secret way in and out of this room somehow. Help me to find it."

But Danny stood in the center of the room helplessly.

"I don't know where to begin," he said. "I don't know how to look."

"Use your wits, then," said Nick. "Sit down and think. Watch me. Give me that stone."

With the stone Nick began tapping the walls all the way around the room; but nowhere did they give back a sound that would indicate that there was a hollow space behind them. In fact they sounded just like any other walls might have done.

Suddenly the detective paused and smiled.

"By Jove, Danny!" he said, "if I had not gone downstairs to let you in they might have given away the secret to me. If I had remained here instead of leaving the room, I would have discovered how they work that secret panel."

"They do?"

"Why, they had no idea that I was here when they entered."

"How do you know that?"

"Because they returned to secure Mabel's clothing. They did not know that anybody was here until they came back into the room. It must have startled them almost as much as I was startled to find all the lights burning."

"Well, they know now that you are here."

"They know that somebody has been here since the disappearance of Mabel. I doubt if they know who it is. Danny, open that door into the hall."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, help me to move this furniture out of the room."

"All of it?"

"I intend to leave this room as bare as it was when the house was built. In other words, I don't intend to leave a single thing in it."

"What's the rest of the people in the house think that something is happening? That somebody is moving in or out?"

"You might shoot out your gun right here, Danny, and the rest of the people in the house wouldn't hear it unless possibly old Simpson might. Come on, now. Help me strip the room."

"Pictures and all?"

"Everything it contains. Leave it absolutely bare."

"We will have to take the bed all apart to get it into the hall."

"Then we will take it apart. I am going to find that secret passage if I have to take down the walls of that room. If I am obliged to bore through each one of the partitions to the opposite side of it, I shall do so, but find that secret panel, or door, or whatever it is, I *will*."

While they worked at moving out the furniture, dawn began to break, and by the time they had finished that part of their task, daylight was established and the sun was rising.

And at last they had the room entirely rude of furniture of any sort. Not a thing remained in it—and still there was no sign whatever of any secret panel or way out of the room.

The floor was of hard wood, beautifully made—what is called a parquet floor.

Nick tapped upon it, sounded it, tested it in every way he could think of, but all without result of any kind. It gave up no information whatever.

Next, one by one, he gave his attention to the partitions; but here again he was at fault, for even their outward appearance showed that there was little or no use in examining them. There was nothing about them to even suggest such a thing as a secret opening. There was no place where it could have been constructed without instant detection by the sharp eyes of Nick Carter.

The ceiling?

He sent Danny to the stables for a step-ladder. Nick had seen one there which he thought would be tall enough, and it was.

When it was brought, he climbed upon that.

First he gave his attention to the large round centerpiece through which the chandelier descended into the room; and he tested it in every way known to him—without result.

Then he moved the step-ladder from place to place around the room, testing all parts of the ceiling—but always with the same result, or rather, always without any result at all, other than to remain more greatly puzzled than before.

"Danny," he said at last, pausing and looking around him, "I have always called myself an expert at finding secret passages and panels and doors and such things. Here I am stumped. The chap who planned this one was a dandy."

"Are you sure that they didn't come into the room through one of the doors?" asked Danny.

"I am. The doors were bolted on the inside. All save that one there, and I was at the other side of that one myself."

"I have heard of doors that were made so that the casing would swing with the doors; so that it did no good to lock them at all."

"I have already tested these doors for that trick. No. They did not use the doors. They came into the room through one of those walls, somehow."

"But that is impossible. You have proved that."

"It looks impossible; but I have not proved that it is impossible since we know that it *was* done."

"Well, what shall we do next? Tear down the walls?"

"I am not quite ready to do that yet; but I will do it before I get through, if the thing is not to be found in any other way. I'll tear the whole house down now, stone by stone, but what I'll unearth these secrets."

"Maybe it's the whole——"

What Danny was about to say was not finished, for at that moment the frightened face of old Simpson appeared in the open door way.

"Mr. Carter!" he cried out. "What in the world has happened, sir?"

"It has happened, Simpson, that your young mistress has been carried off, out of her bed, from this room where she was sleeping," replied the detective.

"When, sir, when?"

"Two hours ago. I am searching for the secret passageway through which she was taken. It is somewhere here, only that I cannot find it."

"But why should they carry her off? I don't understand, sir."

"Neither do I, Simpson. But the fact remains that they have done it. Don't you see now how necessary it was that you should tell me all you knew about the secret? Don't you wish now, more than ever, that you had listened to old Pedro and gone with him that time when he asked you to do it?"

"Don't, Mr. Carter. Please don't say that."

"All right. I won't. But Simpson, if there is anything in that head of yours which you are keeping back from me, I charge you to tell it to me now, for your young mistress' sake. She is in grave danger now, Simpson; nobody knows how grave the danger may be. We do not know into whose power she has fallen, but whoever it is, it is safe to say that they do not mean her any good."

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER'S PERPLEXING PROBLEM.

Poor old Simpson shook his head in an agony of remorse.

"There is nothing, sir," he said. "I have kept nothing back from you. I will admit that during all these years I have been only a stupid, for all the time I have known that there was some sort of a volcano under our feet here. But so many years have passed without anything happening that—well, I had become passive about it, I suppose."

"We will leave this room as it is for the present," said the detective. "Do not put anything back into it, for I meant what I said. If there is no other way, I shall, before the day is over, chop holes through every one of these partitions if necessary, in order to find the thing I am looking for. Simpson?"

"Yes, sir."

"In what capacity did you serve the father of Mabel Vaughan?"

"Part of the time I was his valet, sir."

"At the time of his death I suppose his papers were thoroughly gone over by the executors of the estate, were they not?"

"I suppose they were, sir; only——"

"What are you hesitating about, Simpson?"

"Your question recalled something to my mind that I had entirely forgotten, sir."

"What is it?"

"It was only a short time before he died—two hours, possibly—that he called me to him. He had asked for Pedro, but Pedro was absent, as it happened, and so the master called me. He could barely whisper his directions, sir."

"Well, what were they?"

"He directed me to open a small iron safe that was in his room and to take from it a package of papers—a very small package, sir—that was in one of the compartments."

"Go on, Simpson; go on. I think we are getting at something at last."

"When I did as he requested and returned to his side, he directed me to conceal the papers and to take them to my room and keep them sacredly. I was not to let anybody see them or to know that I had them, and I was to keep them until Mr. Clarence, who was then not of age, should ask me for them."

"But how was Clarence to know that you had the papers?" asked Nick.

"I asked the master that question, and he whispered his reply that 'Clarence will know; and at the proper time he will ask you for them.'"

"Go on. What more?"

"I was to say nothing to anybody at all about them. I was to keep them until Mr. Clarence should ask for them. I took them away among my things. That was twenty years ago, sir."

"Yes. Well?"

"Mr. Clarence never did ask for them—and I suppose the recollection of the incident gradually faded from my memory."

"You have those papers yet, Simpson?"

"Yes, sir. I have always thought that the master intended to give them to Pedro; but Pedro was not there at the time, and so he gave them to me. When Pedro returned the master was beyond speaking."

"I see. But the point is that you have those papers yet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where are they?"

"They are in a steel box in the bottom of my chest in my room."

"Get them and bring them to me in the library. Now, Lucas."

"Yes, sir."

"You remember that cliff where we climbed down to the water yesterday?"

"Certainly."

"That is your post of duty for the remainder of the day, or until I send for you to return here."

"What am I to do there, chief?"

"You are merely to pass the day on the beach and to keep watch."

"For what, sir?"

"For anything that you may discover. You will remember what we were talking about yesterday. You must also remember what has happened here during the night. Miss Mabel is at the present moment somewhere underneath this big building—is hidden away among those secret chambers that lie below here. I am satisfied that she cannot be taken away from where she is with [illegible] through the house, unless I was right in my supposition that there is an underground passage from here to the water. That is what you are to watch for."

"Will you have the papers now, sir?" asked Simpson.

"Yes. At once. Bring them to me in the library. You may also serve me with breakfast in that room. Danny, go and get a bite to eat before you go to your post, but lose no more time than is necessary."

When the detective descended the stairs there was a perplexed and rather a worried expression upon his face, for he did not know what might be happening to Mabel Vaughan during the time that he was so vainly trying to find a way to get to her.

He knew well that he could only succeed by painstaking care; that too much haste might spoil everything; and while it was his impulse to destroy the walls of the room from which she had been taken, and so find out the secret of her abduction without delay, he nevertheless thought it possible that he might save time by other methods.

He had great hopes of those papers which had been entrusted to Simpson so many years ago.

It was barely possible that they would contain the secret he sought.

The fact that the dying man had first called for Pedro Pasquale, the man who was the sharer of his secrets, made the detective believe that they were directly connected with the mystery.

Before going to the library where he had told Simpson to bring the papers to him, he entered the drawing-room—the room from which old Pedro had disappeared so mysteriously so many years ago; and he raised the shades at the windows and let the sunlight flood the room while he looked about him.

Piece by piece he moved every article of furniture that was there—moved each one just enough to satisfy himself that there was no secret entrance connected with any of them; and he examined the walls and the ceiling and the floor of the drawing-room, as he had examined those of the sleeping-room up-stairs.

But he made no discovery.

There was absolutely nothing there, anywhere, to indicate—even to suggest—that there could be such a thing as a secret way out of the room.

"The secrets of this house must be mine before I leave it," he told himself, when at last he reluctantly closed the door behind him and repaired to the library.

[illegible] upon which he had arrived [illegible] for the [illegible] with

the steel box to which he had referred, and which he said he had not yet opened, preferring to do so in the presence of the detective.

"I will eat my breakfast first, Simpson, before I open the box," he said; but he was not long in disposing of the good things that Simpson had brought to him; and all the time old Simpson stood behind his chair, waiting upon him with a new devotion in his manner which was not lost upon the detective.

"Now, Simpson," he said at last, "give me the key to the box. I will open it. I suppose you have other papers and things as well, in this box, have you not?"

"To tell you the truth, sir, I do not know what is in the box beyond the few [illegible] that the master gave into my charge."

"Not know what is in the box? How is that?"

"The box was my father's, sir."

"And he gave it to you?"

"Yes, sir; at the same time that he made me promise not to try to discover the secrets of this house."

"What did your father say to you about the box?"

"He told me to put it away; and he added: 'Some day, when you are older, perhaps you will wish to open it. But there is nothing there which will interest you now. If any of the secrets of the family ever come to you, then open the box. If they do not, it will be as well if you leave it closed forever.'"

"And you never examined the contents of the box?"

"Never, sir."

"And you never opened it at all, save to place those papers that were given to you by your master inside it?"

"Never, sir."

"Simpson, you are the only person I ever knew who seemed to me to be absolutely devoid of curiosity. You are a wonder in that respect. Where is the key?"

"Alas, sir, I cannot find it."

"Cannot find it?"

"No, sir. I supposed I knew exactly where it was; but it is not there. I cannot find the key."

"In that case, we will have to break the box open."

"I fear so, sir."

"Go to the stable, then, and fetch me a hammer and a cold chisel."

"I anticipated your wish in that respect, sir. Here they are."

Nick turned the box in his hands and inspected it carefully before attacking it.

It was much like any other steel box. It was twelve inches long, six inches wide, and six inches deep. Nick was careful to take these outside measurements before he attempted to break it open.

The work of breaking the box open was not great. A few sharp blows with the hammer, and with the edge of the chisel properly applied, did the work, and after a moment the lid flew back, disclosing to view two neat packages of papers, folded document-shape.

The first, or top, package contained only three separate papers; and as Nick took them in his hand, Simpson remarked:

"That is the package that was given to me by the master. I recall the appearance of it now and the number of papers there were, although five minutes ago I could not have told you. The other papers were already in the box, placed there by my father, I suppose."

But the detective made no reply. He was already busily engaged in reading the inscriptions upon the different documents.

The first of these was inscribed:

"An additional will and testament of my effects, which are not enumerated in the last will and testament now in the hands of my attorneys; and this is for the instruction of my son and heir, Clarence Vaughan."

Underneath that was written:

"I trust, my son, that you will regard the requests herein as sacred, and that you will fulfil them to the letter, and in the spirit I desire."

The second paper was indorsed in precisely the same words, save the name, and at a glance the detective understood that this was a paper which had been left to the father of Clarence by *his* father; and the third went back still another generation, and had been left to Clarence Vaughan's grandfather by *his* father.

"This is rather a remarkable condition of affairs," mused the detective, as he laid the papers aside, without yet opening them, and picked up the second package—the one that was already in the box when Simpson placed these with them.

The first of these was inscribed:

"An inventory taken in the year A. D. 1780 by Gerald Vaughan, gentleman and privateersman."

The second: "An inventory taken in the year 1810 by Charles, the grandson of Gerald Vaughan."

The third: "An inventory taken in 1855 by Gerald, son of Charles Vaughan."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SECRETS OF THE STEEL BOX.

"Did your father tell you nothing about this steel box when he gave it to you?" asked the detective, turning to Simpson.

"Nothing more than I have already told you, sir."

"You have no knowledge as to how it came into his possession?"

"None whatever."

"It was not his property; it was the property of his master."

"I know nothing about that, sir."

The detective put down the second package and took the first one in his hand again.

"These three papers," he said, without opening them, "are probably all alike; that is, I surmise from the inscriptions on the outside of each one that one is a copy of another, the only difference being that there is a generation of time between them."

He opened the first of the papers then, and read:

"At Loyola Park, in the year 1881. To my son Clarence, now a child, but soon to grow to manhood, greeting:

"In pursuance of the duty that is left to me to fulfil, and which has descended to me from my father, I give unto you now a trust which you must observe if you would preserve the honor of the family name.

"I give, devise, and bequeath to you all and everything that is contained in the steel chambers underneath this house, directing only that no part of the fortune that you will find there shall be used or employed by you in any way or under any circumstances, save only the one, as follows:

"If reverses should come to you so that you stand in danger of losing this house and the estate which surrounds it, then and then only are you permitted to draw upon the wealth to which reference has been made.

"You will have been instructed by one in whom I have confidence concerning these matters before your eyes shall have read what I now write; and having received those instructions, and having read this document, and having spent a silent oath upon the memory of your father who now writes, you will go then to the shrine of your ancestors, Gerald Vaughan, the first, and there take oath in his presence.

"The gold and the jewels must remain intact, and must descend from father to son intact, for three hundred years, and almost two hundred of those years will have passed by the time that you, my son, are ready to lay down the burden and transfer it to your son.

"You are a Vaughan, and you will deal all that is expected of you; and therefore, with my blessing, I sign myself. GERALD VAUGHAN, Second."

"Well," said the detective, "I have read remarkable documents in my time, but that rather beats them all. You may read it, Simpson, if you like."

"If you will excuse me, sir, I do not care to do so.

"What! Are you still keeping in mind that promise made to your father, Simpson?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. I respect you for it, but I must remark again that you are a remarkable man. You have no curiosity at all."

"No, sir."

Nick now examined the other two documents, and found, as he had expected, that they were in effect the same as the one he had already read, save only that there was the difference of a generation of time between them.

But each of them left in trust, from father to son, a vague fortune that was concealed somewhere under the house, in the secret chambers that were there; each one mentioned the fact that the fortune was to be held in trust three hundred years, and each reposed the same confidence and the same restrictions upon the son who was to follow the father who wrote.

And now Nick applied himself to the second package of papers—those which were marked Inventories—and he perceived that one was almost an exact copy of another.

He applied himself to the last of these, which read:

"Vault A:

"One chest of gold and silver ornaments, without jewels, as follows:" And then followed, article by article, a list as long as your arm, and it included such things as bracelets, gold chains, candlesticks, watches, brooches, etc., etc.

"Vault B:

"One chest of gold and silver ornaments, with jewels set in them, as follows:" And here, as before, was a detailed list, even longer than the other one.

"Vault C:

"One small chest of unset jewels, to the value of about a million dollars, as follows:" And here were enumerated diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and all sorts of jewels that had evidently been torn from their settings; and each one was described with the minuteness of a practical jeweler.

"Vault D:

"One chest of money in gold, of various values, amounting in all, in American dollars, to the sum of four hundred and [illegible]

"Vault E:

"One chest of silver money, as aforesaid, amounting as aforesaid, to one hundred thousand dollars.

"Vault F:

"One chest of silks; one of laces.

"Vault G:

"One chest of miscellaneous articles of value, as follows:" And here followed an enumerated list of them.

The detective put the papers to one side and smiled grimly.

"I guess there is no sort of doubt that the original Gerald Vaughan was a pirate, all right," he said. "But before he died he must have gotten religion. I suppose he thought if he tied up all that stuff for three hundred years, the curse would be off it by that time, and his descendant, whoever he might happen to be, could enjoy the fruits of his robberies. What an old scoundrel he was, to be sure. But, Simpson——"

"Yes, sir."

"This does not seem to bring us any nearer to the secret."

"No, sir."

"I guess in the worst of finding those things. I don't have a top about finding the old pirate's hoard, but I would like to find the greatest treasure that is down there at this moment."

"You refer to Miss Mabel, sir?"

"Certainly I do."

He was staring at the steel box while he talked, and now he threw it suddenly toward him, and again pressed the secret spring.

Then he examined the inside of the box on the outside, and then he examined it on the inside; and then he looked up at his companion with a smile.

"There is something else inside this box, Simpson," he said.

"Is that, sir?"

"There is a full inch of space unaccounted for. The box has a false bottom."

He picked it up in his hands and began searching for a spring, but as he could not find one, he again placed the box on the floor and applied one hand and the knuckles to the bottom.

At the very first stroke of the hammer the other side of the box fell open and there dropped from the concealed receptacle a folded parchment that was yellow with age.

Quickly he unfolded it and spread it open on the table before him, and he saw instantly that he had discovered a carefully drawn chart, or plan—*and he knew that he now held the chart of the subterranean chambers beneath the house.*

It will be remembered that the original house, built by old Gerald Vaughan, was square; and this map that the detective now held in his hands was also square. It showed six rooms inside that square, with corridors leading to them and past them; but it also showed a seventh room which was outside the square, and which apparently had no passage or corridor leading to it.

And inside this seventh chamber there were other squares marked off at one side of it, and these small squares were marked respectively, "Vault A," "Vault B," and so on up to Vault G.

Evidently this was the treasure-chamber. Evidently it was here where the great wealth was concealed.

But there was nothing on the plan to tell how access was to be gained to the places it described. There was nothing there to reveal the secret for which the detective longed for the most—the way into the secret chambers.

"The secret that we most want isn't here, Simpson," he said at last. "I am afraid that we must attack the walls of Mabel's bedroom in order to find it."

"It would seem so, sir."

"Simpson, where—I mean what room did old Pedro occupy in this house before his disappearance?"

"A room in the old part, sir, which was used as an office many years ago. The master, in my time, had it fixed over for the accommodation of Pedro."

"What has been done to that room since Pedro occupied it?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Do you mean that it remains to-day just as Pedro left it?"

"I do, sir. It was closed and locked when he did not return. I doubt if a single person has entered that room since Pedro left it, many years ago. That is, save myself. I was the one who closed and locked it. I stepped inside the room at that time, but no more. I am sure that the door has never been opened since then."

"Then there is one more chance that we may discover the secret. I wonder why I did not think of that question before. Take me to that room at once, Simpson."

"Follow me, sir."

The room which they presently entered was almost bare of furniture. There was a narrow bed, a couch, a small, common bureau, and two chairs; nothing more. There was not even a carpet or a rug on the floor. The room itself was perhaps fifteen feet square.

"Pedro did not live in luxury, at any rate," said the detective, as he stopped upon the threshold and surveyed the interior.

"He could have had all the luxury he desired, sir," replied Simpson. "He was a very favored servant. Hardly a servant at all, if it comes to that. But he had been at sea many years. He used to say that he did not care for the soft things to sit and lie upon."

"I can well believe it. Stay where you are, Simpson, while I look around me a bit."

He stepped forward into the room. The dust of years, an impalpable dust, had settled upon everything. Moths had eaten the blankets on the bed to rags and pulp. The upholstery of the couch had almost disappeared.

As soon as he entered the room, Nick noticed one remarkable circumstance that impressed him as strange: or at least, as if there were a reason for it. One side of the room was absolutely bare of furniture. One side of the room had nothing whatever against the walls.

The walls had been painted and varnished, instead of papered; and now, as Nick stood regarding that particular wall, which had nothing against it or upon it, he noticed that at the far corner there were soiled marks upon the varnish, as if hands had frequently been pressed against that spot.

And instantly the secret of the whole thing came upon him like a revelation: and he turned to Simpson with a smile.

"Simpson," he said very quietly, "I think that I have discovered the secret. Just wait a moment, and see if I have."

CHAPTER X.

THE SECRET OF THE HOUSE.

The light of the candle upon the wall, the fact that the wall was bare of things against it or upon it and the conclusion suggested that, for some purpose, old Pedro had been in the habit of pressing with his hands against the particular portion of the wall, had called to the mind of Nick Carter a description he had once read in a very old book he had picked up on a second-hand stand.

That book had been called "The House of Secrets." And in the description of it it was revealed that persons who were familiar with the secrets had passed from one room to another in the house, without the use of doors at all.

The whole arrangement of the house was simply a system of pivots.

That is to say: Take any room you have in mind, my reader—the room in which you are seated at the moment you read this, if there happens to be one blank wall in that room; and by blank wall is meant a wall without windows or doors in it.

Now, imagine that wall as being distinct from the frame of the building. Imagine that at the top and bottom of the center of it there is a steel rod upon which that entire partition or wall will swing; and then imagine yourself as pressing solidly against that wall with your hands and your weight, at one end of it.

The wall would be pushed away from you where you pressed upon it; the other end of it would, at the same time, swing into the room where you were standing.

That was the manner in which it had been described in the book that Nick remembered to have read so long ago—and that was the idea that suggested itself to him now.

He stepped forward quickly across the room to the place where the spots were on the wall.

He hesitated a moment, to prepare himself for disappointment, if it should come, and then he stepped forward and threw his weight against the wall, pressing with his hands upon the same place where the wall was soiled.

For a moment it resisted him.

For a moment he thought that he was again doomed to disappointment.

But he pressed still harder against it, and then, suddenly, he felt that it was giving way before him.

And once started, it swung easily enough—swung for a space of two feet or more, the far end of it swinging into the room at the same time.

"The secret at last!" was his thought; but he said not a word.

He only continued to press the wall as far forward as it would go—pressed against it until it stopped, having come in contact with the wall that was beyond it.

The way to the secret chamber under the stairs was open before him at last.

He turned with a smile toward Simpson, who was standing in open-mouthed amazement at what he was witnessing.

And Simpson opened his mouth to speak; but Nick put his fingers to his lips, to command silence; and then he walked quickly to the opposite end of the wall, and pressed his weight against that part of it which had swung into the room, thus effectually closing again the opening he had made.

And it was not until it was closed as tightly as it had been before that he spoke.

"Come," he said then to the butler. "I know the secret now. It will not be long before I will have your young mistress back again; but we must arrange first to cut off any possibility of escape on the part of her captors."

"But, sir, shall we not go at once to her rescue?" asked Simpson; and looked upon him with unfeigned admiration.

"Simpson," he said, "you are a remarkable old man. I have said that before, but I feel that I must say it again. You are past seventy years old, and you have not a great deal of brute strength left in you, but I verily believe that you would not hesitate to go down into that dark place alone and unaided to Mabel's rescue."

"Why should I hesitate, sir? She is all that I have left to love now—my young mistress is all the world to me, sir."

"I know. I know. But—how many men are employed on the place, Simpson?"

"Five, sir, besides myself. Three in the gardens and two in the stables."

"I want you to call them all into the house, where I can talk to them. I wish to post them outside, around the house."

"Why, sir?"

"You know that I am going into those secret chambers presently, just as a rat-catcher sends a ferret into rat-holes. When I get down there, it is more than likely that the rats will want to make their escape—if they can."

The butler nodded his head.

"I know enough to know that there probably is not a room in this house of any importance which does not communicate with the vaults beneath it. I want those men to stand on guard around the house, to prevent the escape of any of the rats."

"I see, sir. I will send a few at once. How many of them—all—or just one or two down there, sir?"

"There are two, at least—probably three. One of them is a woman. Perhaps both are women. But I don't want them to escape."

The men were summoned to the house, and Nick talked with them quietly on the back porch.

"We have reason to believe," he told them, "that there are burglars concealed in the house. I am going to try to drive them out, or to capture them. One or more of the burglars are women. I shall post you men around the house, with instructions that you are to keep vigilant watch until I relieve you."

"All right, sir," they said.

"You are only to watch the doors and windows. If escape is tried, it will be through one of the doors or windows of the house. If any one of you should see any person, man or woman, whom you do not know, attempting to leave the house, you are to stop that person, at whatever cost. Do you understand?"

They did; and he went outside himself and posted them where he wanted them.

"Now, Simpson, come with me," he said; and then he led the way again to Mabel's bedroom—to the room he had despoiled of its furniture.

For a moment he stood in the doorway, studying it; and then, with a smile on his lips, he stepped quickly forward and applied his weight to one portion of one of the partitions.

It gave before him instantly, and revealed exactly the same sort of opening that he had discovered in the room formerly occupied by Pedro Pasquale.

"Simpson," he said, when he had closed it again, "I have an idea that when those rats are startled they will attempt to get out by this way—somehow, I think that perhaps it is the most familiar to them. I shall pile some of the furniture against that part of the wall which swings *into* the room, in order to make it difficult for them to open the way; but all the same, I want you to sit here in this room, with a gun in your hands, ready to receive whoever shall appear."

"But, sir, I had hoped——"

"What, Simpson?"

"That I might go with you and assist at the rescue of my mistress."

"You shall assist, all right, but you shall do it by sitting here on guard. Here is a pistol. Take it, and keep watch until I return to you."

"I will, sir."

"Don't shoot unless you are obliged to do so; but don't let anybody escape."

"I won't, sir."

The detective left him then, and went to the drawing-room, and here again he studied the walls for a short space of time; and here again, as before, he selected the one which he believed would move beneath his weight—and he was right.

There was a baby grand piano in this room, and Nick rolled it around the floor until it rested against that portion of the wall which would swing into the room, effectually barring the possibility of any escape by that route.

"I have at least closed two ways against them," he murmured to himself. "I know there are others, but, somehow, I think these are the ones best known to the 'rats' below stairs. And now—now I think it is time for me to begin active operations."

He looked carefully to his pocket search-light, and also to his weapons, which he did not propose to use unless it should be absolutely necessary; and then he took his way once more to Pedro Pasquale's room in the old main building of the house.

He selected this entrance for his own use because his judgment told him that it was probably the most direct way to the center of things below; otherwise, Pedro would not have selected it for his own use—for his own room.

Pedro he looked upon now as a sort of guardian who had served as many of the Vaughan dux as had rendered himself as one of them. "And," he mused, "the keeper of Pedro is down there somewhere, still keeping watch and ward over that remarkable treasure."

When he entered the room he closed and locked the door behind him, and he put the key to it in his pocket, muttering grimly to himself as he did so:

"That makes three ways that I have closed; although it is not likely that those who are down there know of this way at all."

Then he pressed his weight against the wall, and so opened the way to descend; and he passed through into a narrow space between the partitions—a space that was but thirty inches wide—and as the width of the walls of the ordinary dwelling is from eight to twelve inches he knew that a ring affixed to the inside of the wall by which he could pull it shut behind him.

He did that, and then he flashed his light around him.

He found, to his surprise, that he was standing within a system of corridors which seemed to permeate the entire structure of the building, like veins.

The entire house had been built with double partitions, and this space of thirty inches wide was between all of them.

At intervals along the walls inside that space, he could see steps fastened to them; little steps, eight or ten inches wide, with rings attached to the walls over them, to grasp in case a person wished to ascend.

But he did not wish to ascend; he wanted to go below—and he experienced no difficulty in finding the way, now that he was inside the secret of it.

Almost directly in front of him on the floor where he was standing there was a square trap-door, with a ring fixed in it, which he could raise and use; and when he had seized the ring and raised the trap, he found that he had a space of two feet square to squeeze himself through.

But that was easily done, although he remarked to himself that the original Vaughan must have been a slender man, else he would have planned his traps larger.

Below him was a flight of steps of stone, with a railing along the wall to seize upon; and without an instant of hesitation the detective stepped down upon them, and so through the floor upon which he had been standing, until he was low enough to lower the trap into place again over his head.

He had shut off his light, and he stopped now in the darkness to listen.

There was not a sound that came to him. All was as silent as the tomb; and, indeed, it seemed more like a tomb than anything else.

He worked his way to the bottom of the stairs in utter darkness, and not until he was sure that he had reached the bottom did he again make use of his light.

He knew by the length of his descent that he had gone far beneath the regular cellar of the house; he knew that, at last, he was actually in the secret chambers that were underneath the house of the old pirate.

And so he flashed his light and looked around him—to find that he stood in a large, square, stone chamber that was absolutely bare; but on each side of it there were arches which evidently gave upon corridors which led to other parts of the vaults.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DEAD GUARDIAN OF THE TREASURE-VAULTS.

It must be remembered that the detective had rather carefully studied the ancient plan of the subterranean chambers he discovered in the false bottom of the steel box; and as he was an adept at keeping pictured in his mind a map or a plan that he had once studied, it was now almost as if he had the document before him.

The house faced toward the north—that is, toward the Sound; and now, as he recalled the plan to mind, he knew that in the far corner, directly along the way he was facing at that moment, was located the treasure-chamber which contained the vaults which held the treasure-chests.

He wondered if the people who had somehow found their way into those secret chambers had by any possibility discovered the treasure; and he argued that, if they had, he would be most likely to find them there.

The plan had shown no method of entrance to the treasure-chamber, but the detective had no doubt that he could find one, now that he knew so exactly where it was located.

At all events, he decided that it was his best policy to visit that part of the place before he gave his attention to others.

Throwing his light in front of him, but ready at any instant to release the button and so extinguish it, he made his way through one of the arches which he believed would take him nearest to the place he wished to find; and he found himself upon a narrow corridor where the walls and the roof above him, as well as the flooring under his feet, were of stone.

He knew the dimensions of the house, and he knew approximately from what point he had started beneath it. (It must be remembered that reference is now made only to the *old* house—to that structure which was erected by the "old pirate," the first Gerald Vaughan.)

As he made his way along, he knew presently that he had traveled to a point which should be at the extremity of the old house; but still the corridor continued on beyond.

"Old Gerald was not the only one of the Vaughans who liked subterranean chambers," he remarked in thought to himself. "Evidently his son and his grandson after him thought it well to continue the work down here. There is much more to this place than the old plan I saw indicates. And about here should be located that treasure-chamber," he added after a moment's pause.

"It should be about there," he added, nodding his head toward a corner ahead of him. "And I suppose the people I am searching for are either in that vault now, or they are in some other part of the place, at a distance from here."

Recalling the plan to mind as definitely as he could, he stepped forward to that part of the wall which he believed separated him from the treasure-vaults, and, throwing his light upon it, moved the glowing eye slowly along the face of the wall.

In the very center of the space in front of him there was a huge, square, smooth rock; a rock of a different quality and texture from those that surrounded it.

And the instant that the detective's eyes rested upon that smooth rock he smiled.

"Of course," he said to himself, "unless one were looking for the treasure-chamber—unless one knew exactly where to look for it, no attention would be attracted by that smooth rock at all. It would simply be regarded as a part of the foundation—as a part of the wall. But as the case stands, it is very evident to me that the rock is merely another device like the walls of the rooms in the house over my head. The rock is the doorway to the treasure-vault. There can be no doubt of that."

He stepped forward toward it. He passed to the right extremity of it; and then, as he had done with the walls of the house, he placed his hands against it, and then his full weight; and he pushed with all his strength.

At first it refused to move; but he persisted, and after a moment more he felt that it was giving beneath his weight; and then, of a sudden, it seemed to release itself from the corrosion of many years, and it swung inward easily, turning upon a pivot, and so disclosing the fact that, while it was six feet square, it was less than a foot in thickness.

By swinging as it did, it left an opening of almost three feet on either side of it, and through one of these openings the detective shot his gleam of light.

It required only a glance to assure him that he had been correct; that he was standing at the entrance of the treasure-chamber—and he stepped through, and, turning, closed the door of rock behind him.

Feeling now that he was secure, even if those people who infested the secret chambers should happen that way, he turned about and flashed his light again toward the center of the room.

And then he uttered an exclamation of amazement.

For just one fraction of an instant he thought that he

was not alone in the chamber, for there was the figure of a man seated at a small table in the center of the room.

But a second glance told the detective that the man was dead.

The figure was seated at the table, in a chair beside it. One leg was crossed over the other; his right elbow rested upon the table, and his head rested upon his hand; the left hand was resting upon his knee; underneath the gaze of his dead eyes a paper was spread out in such a manner that he looked for all the world as if he were diligently reading it.

"*Pedro Pasquale!*" murmured the detective, in what was almost an exclamation.

There could be no doubt of that. It was the Portuguese who had disappeared so mysteriously from the house above, and who had been dead so many years.

But by what process of nature his body had been preserved as it had, it was impossible to tell. The air in the place was dry and cool, and it was perfectly fresh, and in some way the old man, who had apparently died in his chair while he was reading that paper, had dried up without going through the hideous changes which death is supposed to bring about.

The flesh and the skin had shrunken close to the bones of his face, but it was nevertheless not repulsive to look upon.

The man sat perfectly at ease, as if death had come upon him suddenly, and totally without warning, while he was in the act of reading that paper that was spread out before him.

His clothing, too, hung loosely upon his wasted figure, but it was none the worse, apparently, for the fifteen years of time that had elapsed since he had sat there, dead; and, strangely enough, Nick's first thought then was of old Simpson.

"It will be a great relief to the old butler to know that I have did not fall in one of the corridors, and so starve to death," was his thought. "He can be free now from the remorse he has felt all these years. The very attitude of the dead man shows that he died instantly, and that he had no premonition of it."

There was a lamp upon the table beside Pedro which had burned out. Nevertheless, near at hand was a bottle which contained some oil, and with this Nick filled the lamp and lighted it.

It was a fitful glow around the mummy place; but by its light Nick could see the pictures in the wall beyond Pedro, where a small iron door covered each one, and each door bore its label.

"Vault A, Vault B, Vault C, Vault D, Vault E, Vault F, Vault G," Nick read aloud to himself. "So, there is the treasure that is referred to in the inventories."

And now he stepped forward, and, taking care not to disturb the dead guardian of all this wealth, he secured the paper that Pedro had been engaged in reading when death overtook him so suddenly, fifteen years ago.

It was in Spanish, but the detective easily read it.

"To my son, and my son's son, and his son, and thus on for many generations, until three hundred years shall have elapsed from the fourteenth day of December, in the year 1735, I give greeting:

"You will all have attained to the knowledge of these treasures here before you shall have had the opportunity to read these written words. But I would have you know that a curse rests upon the fortune that is contained in the vaults of this chamber, which curse cannot be raised until three hundred years have passed from the date above mentioned.

"It is not well, nor it is necessary, that I should speak of my career. What is done is done, and it sufficeth that now I have mended my ways, and that for the rest I shall live as good a life as I may, trying by good works to atone for the wrongs that I have done.

"Such treasure as I leave to you, my son, is small as compared to what is here; but you must make it answer your needs, and what is here must pass on and on to your descendants in trust until that one who shall inherit in the year 2035 shall have inherited. Also, such fortune as I leave to you was honestly gained, and there is no taint upon it.

"But I wish you to know that the treasure that is here is a part of the great wealth that was amassed by the great captain who is called Kidd, and that I have rescued it—this part of it, even with the curse that is upon it—for my descendants many generations hence.

"And I claim of you your signature to this document, under mine, one by one as it shall come to you, as a witness that you will keep the trust that is imposed upon you—for only in the greatest extremity can you make use of any part of the treasure that is here, and, even in that case, you must return the sum you take; and no sum must be taken unless it be to save the house and lands from being sold, for these must remain always to my descendants, even to the end of time.

"And if you or any of you shall fail me in this the trust I put upon you, may my curse forever rest upon you, and also the curses that go with all the blood that has been shed for these jewels and riches that are hidden here.

"And as I have affixed my hand, and before where I

have signed, my son shall one day sign his name; and afterward his son; and still afterward, his son; and so on until the allotted time has been fulfilled.

"GERALD VAUGHAN, Gentleman, Privateersman."

Underneath that signature, in regular order, were signed the names of William Vaughan, Charles Vaughan, and Gerald Vaughan—the Gerald who was the father of Clarence and Mabel. It had only remained for old Pedro to take Clarence to the treasure-chamber to affix his signature thereto, to have passed the trust on.

It was a strange fate for a fortune so vast as that one; to lie all those years—already nearing two hundred—without use or profit to anybody.

And now it belonged to Mabel unquestionably.

Nick wondered if she would accept it—she who already had many millions of her own, left to her by her father and her brothers.

The detective folded the paper and put it in his pocket; and then once more he studied the remarkable appearance of old Pedro, who sat so calmly in his chair, where he had watched so many years in the silence of death.

"Poor old Pedro," he thought. "I suppose you were a very faithful servant to your masters; and you came down here, where all this treasure is—the treasure that you loved—to die at last. To die with your mission unfulfilled. And now there is no male descendant of old Gerald Vaughan to inherit this ill-gotten hoard, which he says is a part of the treasure of Captain Kidd."

The detective strode over to one of the casks, and pulled from it the chest that had interested us examining the many jewels.

The lid of the chest was not fastened, and he raised it easily, and for a moment he was gladdened by what he saw.

A small chest literally filled with blazing gems—a hundred of them almost, he thought.

And then he resolutely closed down the lid again and returned the chest to its niche in the wall.

With one more glance at the still figure of old Pedro, he put out the light in the lamp, and turned himself again to the stone doorway, looking upon the right side of it as he came in.

He was, of course, in utter darkness then, for his own light was extinguished; and the door of stone opened mysteriously.

And then, as Nick Carter stepped through into the corridor, he saw, far down it, ahead of him, the gleaming of another light, moving rapidly along the corridor.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSOR.

Instantly the detective realized that he had issued from the treasure-chamber just in time.

He already knew enough about the subterranean chambers under the Vaughan mansion to realize that he might have searched for days there without finding a trace of the persons he sought; but now his usual luck came to his aid, and there, directly ahead of him, was a light which he had only to follow in order to be led directly to Mabel Vaughan.

He closed the stone door behind him, and then started forward swiftly, keeping his hands out in front of him, in order to avoid colliding with any obstacle that might be in his path—and presently he knew that he was gaining upon the person who carried the light.

Once, while he was hurrying forward, that person turned into a side passage, and he lost the light for a moment; but he ran forward on the balls of his feet, and presently got a view of it again.

Then a second turn was made, and Nick found that he was in a wider and loftier corridor, which led down by a gradual descent.

"This," he thought, "must be the corridor which leads to the sea, or, rather, to the Sound."

He judged that he was about three hundred feet behind the person who carried the light, when, all at once, it disappeared totally, and he had no guide to go by.

He stopped in his tracks, for it occurred to him that the person with the light might have heard him in pursuit, and have purposely extinguished the light; but as he listened he heard no sound, nor did he again see the illumination.

Then he thought that the unknown must have turned off into another corridor, and he went slowly and cautiously forward until he believed that he had passed the spot where the light had disappeared.

All the way along he had kept one hand upon the wall he was following, but nowhere had he found a sign of a side gallery; so now he returned on the other side.

But there was no corridor there; neither was there any evidence of the presence of the person who had carried the light.

Then, while he stood in doubt what to do next, and at the point where he thought the light had disappeared, he heard the sound of voices directly in front of him, only

at the opposite side of the gallery; and at the same instant he saw the glow of a light beyond an opening that had suddenly appeared in the wall.

As he watched it, the opening grew broader and greater, and then he saw that a stone doorway, not unlike the one to the treasure-chamber, had swung open, and that a man and a woman were standing together near it, and just inside, talking earnestly.

It was the woman who was speaking, and instantly Nick recognized the expressionless tones of Susan Gross. She was saying:

"I tell you it is the only way. Nick Carter is up there in the house, and sooner or later he will find his way down here. You know what that will mean to us as well as I do. I tell you it is the only way. Get outside by way of the cove, bring a boat around to the entrance at midnight to-night, and we will take Mabel away with us. If we cannot make her give up a million for her liberty, it will be because I don't know how to inflict torture."

"But the treasure!" said the man. "Must we give that up?"

"For the present, yes. We cannot find it. Later, perhaps, we can return for it. But with Nick Carter here on the spot, we are risking everything. No. We must get away to-night."

"All right," said the man. "You will meet me at the cove-entrance at midnight, then?"

"Yes. We will all be there."

The man carried a small lantern in his hand, and now he left his companion without another word, and started rapidly away; and the woman, after watching him for a moment, withdrew into the chamber behind her, and closed the stone door.

Instantly when she did that, Nick started in pursuit of the man who carried the lantern.

The detective ran rapidly forward, keeping his heels clear of the ground, and therefore making no sound—and with the result that the man had not gone three hundred feet before the detective, leaping into the air, clinched on his shoulders and bore him to the floor of the stone gallery.

At the same instant he struck him a solid blow with his fist behind the ear, with the result that he was knocked senseless, or, at least, so stunned that he offered no resistance and made no sound.

It required only a moment for Nick to snap handcuffs upon his feet and ankles; and then he flashed his light into the man's face.

For one brief instant the detective thought that he was looking upon the face of Melville Bergen, so like was this face to the murderer of Clarence Vaughan; but a second glance told him that this was a much younger face than the other—and then the man opened his eyes and stared up at the detective.

"You are a younger brother of Melville Bergen, aren't you?" asked the detective quietly.

"Yes," replied the man as quietly. "And you are Nick Carter, I suppose?"

"You guessed right the first time," returned the detective.

"Well, the game is up sooner than I thought. But I never did think it would succeed."

"Are you a family of criminals?" asked the detective. "I just saw your sister, who calls herself Susan Gross, at the door talking with you. Are you a family of criminals?"

"I suppose we are. What of it?"

"Nothing; only I suspect that your race is run, for a time, at least. Susan won't get off this time. Neither will you. Where is Mabel Vaughan?"

"In there—where you saw me talking with Susan."

"Who else is there? How many are they, and who are they?"

"I suppose I might as well tell you."

"I suppose you might. It will make it easier for you, as well as for me."

"Well, there is only Susan and Imogene——"

"Imogene?"

"Yes. Are you surprised?"

"I thought she was in prison."

"Didn't you know that the governor pardoned her the other day, because she was thought to be dying? And it was remembered that she had done no real wrong. And she is dying—she is dying even now. She has had two hemorrhages since yesterday. I hate this business, Carter. I wish I had never gone into it. But now I suppose I will have to take my medicine."

"I suppose you will. Has any harm befallen Mabel Vaughan?"

"None whatever. She has had the best of care."

"I am going to that room now. Will you keep quiet and say nothing, or shall I have to put a gag in your mouth?"

"I will keep mum if you won't do that."

"Very well. I will leave you here till I come out."

The detective turned once more, and, flashing his light along the wall, he presently found the door before which he had discovered Susan and her lover talking.

Extinguishing the light, he applied his shoulder to the right side of the door, and pushed at first gently, and then more strongly, until he felt it begin to give; and then it swung slowly inward, leaving a space for him to pass through.

He found that he was in the outer one of two rooms; that a light was shining through from the room beyond, and that voices were proceeding from it; and he closed the door behind him and stepped softly forward.

There was a curtain draped over one side of the doorway, and peering beyond this, he saw a room that was comfortably furnished with a bed, a couch, some chairs, and a small oil stove. It was lighted by incandescent lamps attached to the walls.

On the bed, propped up by pillows, was Imogene Mallory, pale and wan, and evidently so weak that she was incapable of motion almost.

On the couch, with a rope around her waist so that she could not rise from it, was Mabel Vaughan, and in a rocking-chair, facing them both, was Susan Gross, with an embroidery-ring in her hands, upon which she was working diligently.

"It is too bad of you, Imogene," she said to her in her cold, monotonous voice, "that after all I could do for you I have always hated you. You know that. Why should I put myself out for you now? I'm sure I don't know. You are dying now by inches. At the most, you haven't a month, perhaps not a week, to live. You ought to be grateful to me that I offer to give you a drop of prussic acid on your tongue, and so end it all. We have got to leave here straight at midnight, and we can't take you with us."

"You monster! You fiend!" exclaimed Mabel Vaughan, with spirit.

"Oh! You're wake up here you! Well, we can't hurt you. You couldn't worry. You are dangerous too valuable to us for that. It will cost you just as much, Imogene—"

Nick Carter stepped forward into the room and interrupted her.

"Hello, Susan!" he said. "Don't rise, or you'll get hurt. What is that you were saying about an even million?"

Susan Gross wheeled in her chair, but without rising. Then, like a flash, her hand flew to her mouth, and she placed something between her teeth; and then there was a crunching sound, as if of glass, and Susan Gross fell back in her chair, dead. She had taken the dose she had just threatened to impose upon Imogene.

"Nick!" cried Mabel. "Nick Carter!"

"Yes," he replied, advancing and releasing her. "It is Nick, all right. It took me a long time to find you, Mabel, but I have succeeded. I think, if you are ready to go home, I had better take you there."

"But we must take poor Imogene, also, Nick. She is dying, and I am so sorry for her. I will care for her as long as she lives now. She has been more sinned against than sinning."

When the detective returned to the corridor, he found that Charles Bergen had somehow managed to slip from the irons that held him, and had made his escape.

Somewhat later, when they were all in the house above ground, and when Imogene had been made comfortable in a room prepared for her, and a doctor sent for, Nick said to Mabel:

"I wonder how Susan Gross ever found the secret of the underground chambers?"

"She told me. It was an accident. She stumbled and fell while caring for my room. She fell against the wall, and it moved under her hand. The rest proved easy for such a woman as she was."

And now there is only this to add:

Every movable partition in that mansion was made thoroughly secure, and the underground chambers were sealed forever. The way to the cove was closed effectually with a blast of dynamite. The contents of the treasure-chamber were given to three trustees by Mabel, with which to build and equip a hospital for incurables, and the bodies of Pedro and of Susan Gross were buried in a near-by cemetery.

Imogene Mallory Bergen lived just ten days after her rescue, and then she passed quietly away in her sleep one night.

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